Wide Sargasso Sea as the antithesis of *Jane Eyre*

by Miho Shimada

.... Who am I and where is my country
and where do I belong and why was I ever born at all....

Wide Sargasso Sea (1966) is the last and best known of the five novels written by Jean Rhys (1894—1979). She is, in addition, the author of three collections of short stories. She had already published four novels before the Second World War, the first of which, *Postures*, published in 1928, was republished as *Quartet* in 1969. The fourth, *Good Morning, Midnight*, was published in 1939. With these early books starting in the 1920s, we might regard her as contemporary with well-known writers such as D. H. Lawence, James Joyce, Virginia Woolf, and Catherine Mansfield, only a little younger and much less recognized and appreciated even by critics of the time.

She lived through the First World War in England, coming from Dominica in the West Indies, where she had been born and brought up until the age of sixteen. She led an unsettled life in London and on the Continent, in Paris and Vienna, becoming familiar with the artists' life in Europe at that time. Her first book, *The Left Bank*, published in 1927, is described on the dust jacket as 'sketches and studies of present day Bohemian Paris'.

In her situation as an exile, Jean Rhys had much in common with Catherine Mansfield who came to London in her youth from New Zealand, the far off Antipodes. Their families were both well-off, and the life enjoyed in those places had been fairly sophisticated. In Britain and Europe, however, they were aliens, and had to lead rootless, bohemian lives, cut off from their homes. A difference between them is that Jean Rhys was of mixed

blood, for her mother was a Creole and her father a Welsh doctor. The sence of alienation must have been deeper in her.

There is another point of resemblance worth noting between these two artists. Just as Catherine Mansfield, who had wanted to cut herself off from New Zealand, came to look back on it with such affection that her best stories are mostly among those based on memories of childhood, places and scenery, so Jean Rhys at first deals with her current life in urban background such as Montparnasse, or Bloomsbury, but in her last work, she reverts to the West Indies, her tropical homeland.

During the Second World War, which might have had a different significance for her from that which it held for Britons and Europeans, Jean Rhys disappeared completely from public view and was forgotten by the world. Retiring to Cornwall, she worked on a novel as well as writing short stories.

Jean Rhys had been inspired by the mad woman in Charlotte Bronte's *Jane Eyre*, who is confined in the attic of Thornfield Hall. She rarely appears in the book: it is at midnight that she does. Once she tries to burn Rochester in bed, another time tears the heroine's bridal veil, and sometimes uncanny cries were heard. But as a whole she is only a subhuman being, hidden away. Her presence has been viewed as reflecting the Gothic Taste of the novel, or as being based on some legend. Psychoanalytical interpretation identifies her presence as an illusion conjured up by the heroine's subconcious as an obstacle to marriage with Rochester.

Jean Rhys happened to be in a situation to know that the circumstances surrouding the mad woman were based on factual reality. The mad woman, the first Mrs. Rochester, was not the product of the author's imagination. Jean Rhys was able to get considerable information about Creole heiresses in the early Nineteeth Century, victims of history at the time of the Emancipation Act. These unfortunate women were helpless, with their fortune in the form of dowries, which exposed them to danger. As a writer, Jean Rhys was siezed by this image and identified it with something deep inside herself. She must have wanted to use all her resources as a writer to unfold this theme against the beautiful tropical nature of the

West Indies, familiar to her from childhood.

When *Wide Sargasso Sea* was published in the 1960s, it was welcomed with enthusiasm. It came after an interval of more than two decades since her previous work before the Second World War. The age had advanced enough to accept and appreciate her work. Though her career as a writer started early enough for her to be regarded as contemporary with the generation of 1920s, her work is relevant to this present day. She may be described as 'Post Modern', if this term can be taken to refer an age, following an age dominated by Western values when other, more diverse and hitherto disregarded values are explored.

Wide Sargasso Sea, which concerns the earlier life of Mr. Rochester, one of the main characters of *Jane Eyre* and his first marriage, seems to be an exact pendant to Charlotte Bronte's masterpiece, in spite of the fact that each of these works has distinct characteristics reflecting its own age: romantic realism of the early Victorian novel, and that of the present time, the later 20th century. In both cases, however, it is not that the age influences them but that they seem to lead or represent something of the age. Jane, the heroine of Charlotte's novel, is full of the energy of early Victorian idealism, and puritan morality, while Antoinette in Jean's story is never triumphant, constantly suffering from racial alienation from both sides, and is fragile and powerless in spite of her beauty.

Rochester, who gives such a masculine, sometimes villainous impression in Bronte's work, seems utterly weak in Jean Rhy's novel. In the arranged marriage, with a mercenary motive, he refers to his own 'fautless performance'. He has little will of his own, is just self-centred, with little capacity to understand his wife's suffering. He is too suspicious, easily at the mercy of the malignant people around them, white, and black as well. He lacks patience to listen to his wife. He betrays her by flirtating with her sly maid, a coloured girl, rousing Antionette to desperate anger. Eventually he drives her to madness.

Antoinette Cosway is the heroine's maiden name in *Wide Sargasso Sea*. Bertha is a wrong name employed by Rochester. After he has received slanderous letters about Antoinette herself and her mother's madness from

a native calling himself Antoinette's half brother, he becomes suspicious and never stopped calling her by her mother's name. It was a cruel and insulting way to hurt her.

The first part of the novel consists of a reminiscence related by the heroine of her childhood, alienated and troubled by nightmares. When she was still very young, her mother was abandoned by her husband, an Englishman called Cosway with two little children, Antoinette and her baby brother, at the time when the Emancipation Act was passed. Penniless and helpless, they were exposed to malignity and insults. The white people would say, 'When trouble comes close ranks', and so they did. But because the mother was a Creole, they were not allowed in the ranks, but were left outside of the white society. Because she was young and pretty, the native women had never approved of her. One day the horse on which she used to ride about was found poisoned. Antoinette heard her mother saying to herself, 'Now we are marooned, now what will become of us?'

Little Antoinette was left with no one to take care of her, because her young mother was full of worries of her own. Thus as a little child, she felt as if rejected by her mother inside the house, and outside she was ill-treated and discriminated against by native children. Tia was the only native child whom Christophine, the native nurse, brought in to be her friend. But Tia cheated Antoinette of some new coins and stole her clothes while they were bathing in the river one afternoon.

Later when her house was attacked and burned by a group of natives, she found Tia and her mother not far off among the rioters. Antoinette ran to her, because she felt that Tia was all thet was left from her past: they had eaten the same food, slept side by side, bathed in the same river. As she ran she thought she would live with Tia and would like her, and not leave her old estate, Coulibri. But Tia had a jagged stone in her hand, which she threw at Antoinette. Antoinette did not notice that, only felt something wet running down her face. She looked at Tia, whose face crumpled up as she began to cry.

At this very early stage of her life, Antoinette had already experienced the hatred and malice of human beings, which she was unable to account

for. It hurt her so deeply that she became a misanthrope as a little child. She went alone to a part of Coulibri where she had never been before, where people seldom came, with no road, path or track. She thought

> '... if the razor grass cut my legs and arms I would think, 'It's better than people.' 'Black ants, red ones, tall nests swarming with white ants, rains that soaked me to the skin— once I saw a snake.
> All better than people. Better, better, better than people' (p. 24),

She watched flowers in the sun, thinking of nothing, and felt as if a door opened and she was somewhere else. She had become something else, not herself any longer. She know the time of the day when it is hot and blue with no clouds yet the sky can have a very black look.

What impresses the reader of *Wide Sargasso Sea* is the description of the overwhelming beauty of the natural enviroment. Antoinette is the child of this natural beauty. She was born to it. All of their Coulibri estate she saw had gone wild, to bush, because there was no slavery anymore— 'why should anyone work?' This never saddened Antoinette, because she did not know the time when the place was prosperous. She was familiar with the mysterious beauty surrounding her. In the garden there were various kinds of orchids flourishing out of reach, or for some reason not to be touched. One was snaky looking, another had long hanging tenacles bare of leaves, but when it flowered not an inch of those tenacles showed. The bell-shaped mass of white, mauve, deep purples, was wonderful to see. The scent was very sweet and strong, and she never went near it.

> 'I love it more than anywhere else in the world. As it were a person. More than a person. (p. 74)

So she insisted, and Rochester teased her for her ignorance of other places in the world. When Rochester betrayed Antoinette, falling easily to the temptation of the coloured maid, her anger was not directed against the maid. But it was because of this place she had so loved that she was so furious.

'Do you know what you've done to me? It's not the girl, not the girl.

But I love this place and you have made it into a place I hate. I used to think that if everything else went out of my life I would still have this, and now you have spoilt it.' (p. 121)

The second part of the book starts with Rochester's recollection. For him who had been sick in bed for three weeks immediately after arriving in Jamica, the tropical climate was often something other than pleasant. 'What extreme green,' was all he could say while travelling in the mountain on the way to their honeymoon house.

'Everything is too much.... Too much blue, too much purple... the flowers too red, the mountains too high, the hills too near' (p. 59)

Nature makes him tired. It seems to absorb human energy and deprive him of the power of action. You cannot control yourself here. Human lives here are at the mercy of nature. Sometimes it gives him an excuse to neglect expressing important sentiments to Antoinette.

The Western attitudes towards nature may be described as adversarial; here Rochester's is apparently antipathetic. As for the people here, it seems that they are part of nature: they do not try to resist it, but live in accord with it. Rochester, however, cannot understand them, and complains about Christophine's laziness. Then Antoinette explains.

'Again you are mistaken. She seems slow, but every move she makes is right, so it's quick in the end.' (p. 72)

The relationship between Antoinette and Rochester is similar in some ways to that between Antoinette's mother and her English husband, Mr. Mason. There are a number of echoes of the earlier relationship. Antoinette's mother insisted that the native should not be called niggers, 'nor even Negro. You must say black people.' Further, she says:

'You don't like, or even recognize, the good in them,' 'and you won't believe in the other side.'
'They're too damn lazy to be dangerous' 'I know that.'
'They are more alive than you are, lazy or not, and they can be dangerous and cruel for reason you wouldn't understand,' (p. 28)

Even little Antoinette is aware of Mason's incomrehension of the world to which his wife belonged. 'None of you (the white people) understand us,' she thought. Her mother's repeated entreaty to leave was disregarded and this led to the disaster of the baby's death in the fire caused by the riot when the house was attacked. The break-up of the family ensued. Antoinette's mother gave herself over to drinking. When Antoinette went to see her, she saw her on a black servant's arm surrounded by native servants. In the end she killed herself in madness.

Did Antoinette trust Rochester from the first? No, by intuition she was afraid of him and tried, unsuccessfully, to refuse the marriage. When asked by Rochester the reason for her refusal, she answered,

'I didn't like the way you laughed. You don't know anything about me.' He replied,

'I'll trust you if you trust me. Is that a bargain? You will make me very unhappy if you send me away without telling me what I have done to displease you. I will go with a sad heart.'
'Your sad heart.' (p. 66)

she said and touched his face. He kissed her fervently, promising her peace, happiness, safety.

She gave way after all. Rochester could imagine she had given way to the arguments or threats of Richard Mason, the arranger of the marriage, whom he would not trust much, or to his own half-serious blandishments and promises.

But in the process of the marriage, the insincerity and irresponsibility of the man and the desperation of the woman become more clearly contrasted. He had been cold from the first: what he had for her was only physical desire. She, on her part, found herself deeply attached to him.

'I never wished to live before I know you. I always thought it would be better if I died. Such a long time to wait before it's over.'
'Why did you make me want to live? Why did you do that to me?'
'Because I wished that. Isn't that enough?'

'Yes, it is enough. But if one day you didn't wish it. What should I do then. Suppose you took this happinessaway (p. 76—p. 77)

Rochester confesses to himself,

'As for the happiness I gave her, that is worse than nothing. I did not love her. I was thirsty for her, but that was not love. I felt very little tenderness for her, she was a stranger to me, a stranger who did not think or feel as I did.' (p. 78)

In despair Antoinette visits Christophine to ask help to regain his love. Christophine had moved away and lived by herself now, because Rochester did not like her. She was really the only person Antoinette trusted. Their relationship is more than that between mistress and servant, and is without racial discrimination. Antoinette knelt close to her, on grass near a stream.

'You smell the same.'

'You came all the way to tell me that?' (p. 89)

When Antoinette explains her plight to Christophine, her answer is 'you ask me a hard thing. I tell you a hard thing. Pack and go.' Her advice was to go away from her husband, anywhere, Martinique or England. When Antoinette complains she has no money of her own, for everything she had now belongs to him, Christopline says sharpy, 'What you tell me, 'That is English law.' 'Law the Mason boy fix it.' She tells her to ask him for some of her money. But after all it is impossible for Antoinette to get away from him or to ask for money.

Antoinette wanted Christophine to use her craft of magic as the last resort to win back his love. Christophine refused to meddle between them, but eventually yielded to her entreaty.

Catastrophe comes. Rochester's suspicion seems to be confirmed. He imagined the aphrodisiac was actually an attempt to poison him. Christophine came to their house, and confronts Rochester.

'*Your wife!* You make me laugh. I don't know all you did but I

know some. Everybody know that you marry her for her money and you take it all. And then you want to break her up, because you jealous of her. She is more better than you, she have better blood in her and she don't care for money... You are young but already you hard. You fool the girl...' (p. 125—126)

'You make love to her till she drunk with it, no rum could make her drunk like that, till she can't do without it... she can't see the sun any more. Only you she see. But all you want is to break her up.'

Christophine is an important character in this book. She was Antoinette's father's wedding present to her mother, for she came from Martinique, the same place as Antoinette's mother. They don't know how old she is, and she is known to use 'obeah' a kind of magic. She has influence on the natives in the locality. Antoinette and her mother were saved by her from starvation during the years they were abandoned. She is a fighter and has experience of being arrested and put in prison. She is not afraid of the police when the white people try to theaten her.

Christophine warns Rochester that if he forsakes Antoinette, people around her will tear her in pieces—as they did her mother. When she had said what she needed to say, she left them for good, while Antoinette was sleeping. Christophine suggested she had given her something to sleep when she was in the state of derangement in her house, so that she would wake feeling all right.

Rochester, though he had promised Christophine to protect his wife when she left them, did not keep his word, but started making arrangements for returning to England. He was already preparing to treat her as a mad person. His suspicion knows no limit. There remain ambiguities throughout the novel, and the more one reads, the more one finds difficulty in establishing the absolute, objective truth. Doubts remains concerning Antoinette's sexual relations with some other man.

This is a book of thorough hatred and revenge. For Rochester the tragedy was induced by an alien culture and enviroment. Though he is also a victim, of his family's plan to marry him off to a Weat Indian

heiress, he takes revenge on his bride and justifies himself by claiming to have been deceived concerning her background. At the end, however, she takes her revenge, led by a vague intuition, 'Now at last I know why I was brought here and what I have to do,' she says and starts walking, holding a candle in her hand, before finally burning down Thornfield Hall.

One theme of the novel may be a conflict between different cultural values. The English and European people coming from outside might find their moral standards lose their basis in the West Indies. They lose sight of the clear outlines of individual personalities in which they have firmly believed. They then give up all efforts to adhere to moral traditions. In *Jane Eyre* the individual characters are clear cut, face each other, and exchange ideas with some effectiveness. Conversations between them are conducted, making it possible to communicate mutually, agree or disagree. Between Rochester and Antoinette there is little communication. Antoinette tries to be reasonable and does her best to explain her situation, but Rochester will not listen or try to understand her. He emotionally turns away from her.

Jane was able to pursue her ideal of love and marriage and succeeded in it, even resisting St. Johne's powerful pressure on her to sacrifice herself and serve God. In *Jane Eyre*, words or expressions signifying independence or freedom or individuality are emphasized, and contrasted with slavery, bondage, imprisonment, rebellion, escape or bursting of bonds. The fulfilment of Jane's happiness in her marriage to Rochester is expressed in terms of freedom: 'to be together is for us to be at once as free as in solitude, as gay as in company.' 'I am a free being with an independent will.'

The heroines of these two novels, the first and second Mrs. Rochester respectively, start their stories with memories of childhood. The story of the second Mrs. Rochester is about the process leading to her marriage to Mr. Rochester whereas main part of the first Mrs. Rochester's story starts just after their marriage. In both, the experience of childhood is the basis of their later life. In Jane's case her character develops steadily with firm convictions about herself, her morality and faith; her life as it were

ascending towards the ideal marriage. While in the case of Antoinette, with marriage plotted for her against her will, her life descends or falls to its own destruction. Perhaps from the first she did not have the will to live on. Her life had been cursed beyond individual efforts to escape. Her beauty buried in such a fascinating land was doomed to perish.

In Jane's story the West Indies are hidden behind the names of places and persons such as Mr. Mason, and the scenes of that country never appear. In the story of Antoinette, England is just a far off dream. She had talked that she would be a different person if she went there and different things would happen. She never goes there: Thornfield attic was not England. She musn't leave her own land. Like plant there her feet stuck to the land, while the image of birds was a symbol of travel in Jane's story.

Rochester seems perfectly to fit in both novels: there seems no contradiction about him throughout both works. It is as if we can see his life as a single straight line. Then we notice his image as so far understood in *Jane Eyre* changed in the light of *Wide Sargasso Sea.* We remember he was not settled in his house, but always out travelling alone, as if wandering. He is a man suffering from the burden of the past. He confesses his past briefly to Jane, with the excuse that he was young and ill-treated by his father and his elder brother and was a disappointed man. But he must after all atone for the past. The fire of racial rage that chased Antoinette in the West Indies, where possibly he did not try to face the problem for his wife, chase him eventually burning down his hall and deprive him of his sight and an arm.

The reader may see how these two artists, in creating their stories, were true to their own view of reality, and it is this quality that makes it possible for the two novels complement to each other in such a fine way.

As can easily be seen, the two novels are quite distinctive. Further, it can be said that Jean Rhys's story is a complete refusal of the idealism of Charlotte Bronte's; it upsets all the values of the past. The English novel developed with the rise of the modern bourgeoisie, and briefly speaking, their central ideas are freedom and individualism. Since Austin's novel

onwards, all modern novels can be interpreted by that line. They are absolute truth that must be insisted on in the Weatern Civilization. Jean Rhys's novel is not just the complement of Charlotte's but it is rightly the antithesis of it.

NOTES

This article is based on my presentation at the seminar on 'the English novel' at the London Polytechnic, Department of Literature, July 1989

Texts used
Jean Rhys: *Wide Sargasso Sea* (Penguin Books, 1968)
Jean Rhys: *Quartet* (Perennial Library 1981)
Jean Rhys: *Smile Please, An Unfinished Autography* (Penguin Books, 1981)
Jean Rhys: *Letters 1931—66*

Charlotte Bronte: *Jane Eyre* (Penguin Books, 1966)
Charlotte Bronte: *Jane Eyre* (Oxford University Press, 1980)